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SUBJECT: INDIGENOUS INTERNS ON RACISM, NATIONALIZATION AND
THE UNITED STATES

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Three of the Mission's indigenous interns met with Poloff October 18 and expressed their views on discrimination in Bolivian society, the continued popularity of nationalization, and the reasons for anti-American sentiment in Bolivia. The root cause of discrimination, per the consensus reached by the group, stems from unequal access to adequate education coupled with urban migration. The three argued that nationalization is popular due to a general sense of nostalgia for the pre-1985 era; because many NGOs, public universities and interest groups which support the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) have perpetuated a socialist agenda; and due to a widespread belief that the public sector is the easiest way to get rich. In terms of anti-American sentiment, the interns posited that "leftist and radical leaders" demonize the United States for purely political reasons, to boost their popularity and to advance their socialist, nationalist and indigenous agendas. Over time, these groups have succeeded in making the United States the enemy. While the interns clearly do not represent the views of their larger community, they represent an illuminating snapshot of Bolivian society in transition, as seen by individuals who have had unique experiences both in their own communities and because of their exposure to our internship program. End Summary.

Background

¶2. (SBU) In 2006, the Embassy's Management Section established an internship program targeting university students from various indigenous groups with the objective of identifying potential FSNs and/or future indigenous leaders and to foster insights into our programs. Poloff met three of the Embassy's indigenous interns October 18. All are Aymaras and each is from a different rural zone within the La Paz department. All three interns are university students; two attend the University of El Alto (a public university), the third attends a rural branch of the Catholic University. Two are pursuing the equivalent of a master's degree in education and/or public policy, the

third is studying agricultural engineering. The three participated in an Embassy-sponsored international visitors program to the United States in January 2006. Each has worked for the Embassy for three months. They range in age from 27-30 years old.

Discrimination in Bolivia - Access to Education is the Key

¶ 13. (SBU) All three argued discrimination is a problem in Bolivia; however, the consensus was that discrimination is not necessarily color-based. The root cause of discrimination, per the group's consensus, stems from unequal access to adequate education coupled with urban migration. Each member of the group emphasized the poor quality of rural public education, stating that it is not unusual for a child to complete elementary school barely knowing how to sign his/her name. All agreed that Bolivia's 1994 education reform has been a failure in rural areas, leaving children less, rather than better, educated.

¶ 14. (SBU) Over the past 35 years, Bolivia has seen significant urban migration. The lack of adequate education in rural areas not surprisingly has translated into significant barriers to entry into the urban job market, according to the interns. They said that even educated rural migrants have difficulty competing for jobs because most urban employers (private and public sector) assume people from the countryside lack adequate knowledge and experience to perform any job other than menial labor. The lack of Spanish has been a clear impediment for entry into public sector jobs (historically considered the best

jobs in Bolivia). (Note: According to the Bolivian National Institute of Statistics only 34 percent of rural Bolivians speak Spanish as their mother tongue. End Note) The interns noted that this urban migration also creates tensions among the indigenous. Each of the students commented on how new migrants face discrimination from earlier migrant groups from the same rural communities, with older migrants looking down on the "traditional" and "uneducated" ways of new migrants.

¶ 15. (SBU) One of the interns proposed that the Morales administration's policies are not improving education, the other two concurred. All of the interns argued that changing curricula to focus on Aymara (and other indigenous languages) is an irrational strategy given the current challenges to the educational system, as well as the need for Bolivia to become more fully integrated into the global community. The group consensus was that the MAS-led government has focused on indigenous language and culture in schools as a political ploy to placate its base.

¶ 16. (SBU) The interns acknowledged that public and private institutions discriminate against indigenous peoples based on their surnames and indigenous dress. The most obvious form of discrimination was the practice of excluding people with indigenous surnames from public institutions, which was pervasive until the 1980's. Likewise, many private employers discriminate against female employees who use traditional dress. The female in the group discussed how wearing "chola" clothing (a many layered skirt, a shawl, and a bowler hat) in a professional environment is not acceptable. In a previous job, some people in her office assumed by her dress that she was not educated. Under the current GOB, reverse discrimination toward more traditional business-dress (especially by men) in the public sector is common. A male member of the group noted that if government officials wear a tie they are called a "k'ara", a derogatory term for Caucasians in Aymara.

Why is Nationalization Popular?
Nostalgia, Opportunism & Riches

¶ 7. (SBU) Each member of the group advanced his/her ideas as to why nationalization is so popular. The first reason proffered is a general sense of nostalgia for the pre-1985 era. The interns stated that many Bolivians look back fondly on that era when the government controlled up to 85 percent of all companies, remembering it as a time of high employment rates. An intern explained that due to the lack of education most Bolivians do not fully comprehend why the pre-1985 system collapsed and that the endemic corruption and cronyism that plagued state-run enterprises are often overlooked.

¶ 8. (SBU) The interns then expounded on how leaders from various sectors, NGOs, public universities, unions and other interest groups exploit the pervasive lack of education in society to push their statist, communitarian agenda. The left blames privatization for Bolivia's high unemployment and generally poor economic performance, never acknowledging the problems of the pre-1985 era. One student said when he first started public university he shared this leftist thought. Over time, he realized that the "leftist agenda including nationalization" was not sustainable. The two interns who attend public universities explained that the universities are full of radical left (Marxist, Trotskyites and Maoists) students and professors. One of the students said the MAS government uses state tools to expand its leftist message to an even larger audience.

¶ 9. (SBU) A member of the group introduced the idea that politics and working in the public sector have historically been the path to getting rich in Bolivia. The other two interns agreed and then each added that many Bolivians do not see the private sector as the means to prosperity. Instead, the elite have always been involved in politics and worked in the public sector. All three agreed that

many Bolivians view nationalization as a possible entry-point into the public sector and therefore the promise of future riches.

Why is Anti-American Sentiment So Strong?

¶ 10. (SBU) The group consensus regarding anti-American sentiment is that "leftist and radical leaders" demonize the United States to boost their popularity and to advance their socialist, nationalist and indigenous agendas. One student explained that until the mid-1990s USAID assistance was largely ineffective and that many Bolivians felt the assistance went into the pockets of the elites. "Leftist leaders" exploited this perception. As indigenous movements grew in the early 1990s, "leftists" allied themselves opportunistically with the indigenous movements. Leftist leaders told indigenous groups that indigenous subjugation was the result of imperialist (i.e. U.S.) intervention in Bolivia. According to the interns, radical elements of society -- such as their university classmates -- intimidate people who view the United States favorably. For example, all three of the students state they would not openly advertise that they work for the Embassy.

¶ 11. (SBU) One intern also pointed-out a major inconsistency in the MAS agenda. MAS leaders frequently hold up the Inca empire and the concept of the "ayllu" or community as the first "socialist or communist" society in history. However, the "ayllu" historically included private property and community (or shared) property. Per the students, many indigenous people are very uncomfortable when MAS leaders talk about how pre-Columbian indigenous society was communist. One of the students cited the example of Riego Alfa which was an attempt to turn a modern day "ayllu" into a collective. There was so much infighting between members of Riego Alfa who wanted to protect their individual property that the collective eventually failed.

Comment

T12. (SBU) While the interns clearly do not represent the views of their larger Aymara community (their educational level and pro-U.S. sentiments themselves are unique), they articulated some of the institutional problems facing Bolivian society. We record their views as a snapshot of Bolivian society in transition, as seen by individuals who have had unique experiences both in their own communities and because of their exposure to our internship program.

End Comment.

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